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ABSTRACT

Discussion starters, the result of collaboration between the Indonesian Directorate General of Nonformal Education, Youth, and Sports, and World Education, Inc., are simple learning tools used to generate discussion among community groups involved in nonformal education. Appropriate in and adaptable to a variety of settings, content areas, and program formats, discussion starters consist of a brief dialogue or story and supporting easy-to-use audio-visual materials (such as tape recordings or posters) that present opposing views of a specific community problem or situation in a non-didactic fashion and encourage participants to analyze their own similar beliefs, experiences, and problems through dialogue. In general, discussion starters present a balanced dialogue on the issues, defend the village perspective, allow participants to arbitrate opposing viewpoints, include facilitator instructions and discussion questions, and use easily-reproduced materials. Discussion starters vary from short, simple dialogues for use at the village level to longer, more complex presentations appropriate for training fieldworkers. Three samples demonstrate important points in the development and use of discussion starters for readers who want to develop their own materials. The illustrated samples, which present the issues of breast-feeding, debt, and entrepreneurship, demonstrate the general format of the materials. (SB)

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DISCUSSION STARTERS

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SUMMARY: Discussion starters are simple learning tools used to generate dialogue and discussion among community groups involved in nonformal education. They consist of simple-to-use audio-visual materials and can be used for needs assessment, training, and evaluation.

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25. DISCUSSION STARTERS: describes how dialogue and discussion can be facilitated in community groups by using simple audio-visual materials.

price: 1-15 $1.00 each 16-25 $1.50 each

This note is based on the experience of field practitioners in nonformal education working in the context of a long-term collaborative effort between the Directorate General of Nonformal Education, Youth, and Sports of the Indonesian Ministry of Education and World Education, Inc.

Discussion starters were originally developed to activate a participatory learning process for community-based learning groups. Over the years, however, a variety of uses and formats have been found for discussion starters. They are currently being used by a variety of trainers, extension workers, and educators throughout Indonesia. At present the technique is still being refined, modified, and adapted to numerous development activities calling for increased levels of participant dialogue and discussion.

In the interest of disseminating information about successful, innovative methods and materials for adult and nonformal education, the Center for International Education has included this publication in the Technical Note series. We hope that the information presented here with examples is sufficient for readers to develop and use discussion starters in their own specific settings. We encourage readers to share with us their reactions to both the technique and its presentation and similar experiences and methods being used. Technical Notes are available from:

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TECHNICAL NOTES

DISCUSSION STARTERS

Introduction

Many nonformal education programs stress participation, two-way communication, problem analysis, and content relevancy. They focus on peer learning, awareness building, experience sharing, and sensitivity to local knowledge and values. Whatever the terminology, the emphasis is on process. In practice at the community level, process depends on generation of effective discussion and dialogue.

Unfortunately, participating in or leading an effective discussion is not easy. Whole fields of inquiry in psychology and sociology are dedicated to the intricacies of group dynamics, yielding a vast array of theories and techniques. Despite this mass of research, few methodologies have been developed which are useful in the day-to-day implementation of community education programs. This is especially true in many Third World settings where field activities are constantly being challenged by constraints of time, resources, and expertise.

This technical note introduces discussion starters, simple and practical tools developed for use with community groups involved in nonformal education programs. From experience, discussion starters have proved to be appropriate in a wide variety of settings, content areas, and program formats. They have been used successfully with village-level discussion groups as well as in staff training at the national level.

A discussion starter is a learning tool which stimulates the processes of discussion and dialogue. It consists of or is supported by simple-to-use-and-develop audio-visual media. Discussion starters present different and opposing views of a specific problem or situation. They are used to encourage people to analyze their own beliefs, experience, knowledge, actions, and problems through group dialogue and discussion.

Discussion starters are not didactic or persuasive teaching techniques. Learners themselves analyze situations in which there are no predetermined right or wrong conclusions. The materials presented are usually brief and general; learners fill in the details from their own experience and from their own perspective. Through discussion learners evolve their own analyses and conclusions regarding their particular situations.

There is no one best medium for the presentation of discussion starters. They can be read aloud, tape recorded, or role played. Posters and other visual aids are often used to enhance interest. The best material is whatever works best with a particular group and whatever is appropriate given the amount of time and resources available. Discussion starters encompass a variety of techniques and materials bound together around a single objective: the facilitation of effective dialogue and discussion.

This technical note presents and discusses three sample discussion starters. It draws upon experience in Indonesia to clarify for readers important points to consider in developing and using discussion starters. The following examples are the focus of this note:

Example I: "Modernity vs. Mother's Milk: Who Is Right?"

--a simple discussion starter intended for village-level use on attitudes, beliefs, and practices concerning breast-feeding.

Example II: "Si Kabayan Pays His Debt"

--a discussion starter based on the local folk story concept. It uses posters and a modified flip chart for presentation.

Example III: "What Is Entrepreneurship?"

--a discussion starter used for training in income generation with dialogue either recorded or role played.

Setting

The discussion starters presented here are the product of a collaborative effort between the Indonesian Directorate General of Nonformal Education, Youth, and Sports and World Education, Inc. Since 1971, they have pooled their resources in order to develop effective approaches, techniques, and materials for community education programs. Their efforts have centered around community-based learning groups. These groups are community members who meet on a regular basis to analyze common problems, build awareness, and share experience and knowledge. In addition they strive to acquire new knowledge relevant to their shared needs, develop skills, mobilize resources, and undertake cooperative efforts aimed at community development. Learning groups are either based on indigenous social formations (women's groups, farmers' associations, cooperatives) or are formed in neighborhoods based on common needs (literacy, health, income generation, etc.).

Through pilot activities with learning groups in several regions of Indonesia, nonformal education staff realized that the concepts of participation, cooperation, and two-way communication were much easier to speak about than to practice. Some of the problems found to block effective learning group dialogue and discussion include:

- Community Norms: Learning groups often comprised a cross-section of the community. Poor, young, and low-status persons had difficulty participating. They became passive listeners.
- Facilitator Skills: Fieldworkers directly involved with the learning groups lacked the experience and abilities to generate effective discussion. The knowledge, perspectives, and experience of group members remained untapped. Information was usually presented through a didactic, lecture-style process.
- Materials: Besides being in short supply, materials used with groups did not succeed in stimulating thought, analysis, and discussion. Seldom, if ever, did groups contribute to the development of materials; hence, the content presented was often irrelevant to daily community concerns.

The learning group concept rests upon dialogue and discussion. However, despite stated program philosophy and intentions, the usual learning process taking place was traditional and didactic. An awareness of these field-level problems led to the development of discussion starters as a way to promote effective participation through generation of real dialogue and discussion.

What Is a Discussion Starter?

A discussion starter is a simple learning tool used to generate dialogue and discussion. A discussion starter can be presented in a variety of ways and supported by different media; however, key features are found in all discussion starters no matter what form the specific material may take:

- Simplicity: A discussion starter is easy to develop and use. It can be developed by learning groups themselves and does not require a high level of skill on the part of the facilitator.
- Openness: A discussion starter does not give answers; it poses problems, situations, or circumstances. Problem definition, analysis, and solutions are in the hands of the learners.

- Adaptability: The discussion starter format is content free in that it can be adapted and modified to fit a variety of subject matter and learning situations.
- Dual/Multiple Perspective: The basis for dialogue is established through presentation of two or more viewpoints of a specific situation.
- Community Relevancy: The materials focus on immediate community issues and strive to incorporate local knowledge, experience, and perceptions.
- Flexibility: Discussion starters can be used for a range of activities from initial needs assessment to training to evaluation.

The above features will be made clear in presentation and discussion of the sample discussion starters used in a variety of field settings and programs in Indonesia.

Example I: Modernity vs. Mother's Milk: Who Is Right?

This first discussion starter (pages 6 and 7) focuses on community attitudes toward breast-feeding. Despite its simplicity, important community issues besides breast-feeding are introduced. These include the husband's role in watching out for the family, the concept of the "modern" woman, and attitudes toward status and beauty in the village.

This example illustrates what has become the general format for discussion starters:

- A balanced dialogue is established consisting of opposing viewpoints concerning breast-feeding.
- The village perspective (current practice) is presented and defended, not ridiculed.
- The issues are presented in context, thus keeping the dialogue on a personal level.
- Graphics are used to help group members visualize the perspectives presented. Group members are encouraged to become arbitrators between two opposing viewpoints.
- Process instructions for the facilitator are included. The activity is structured so that process is carried out entirely by the group.
- The materials are simple. These sheets can be reproduced by mimeograph. Group members can keep the sheets for later use with friends or family.

The development of this type of discussion starter requires not only knowledge of what attitudes and practices a community should have, but also an understanding of what the community is now doing and why. Because discussion starters require opposing and equivalent viewpoints, an understanding of existing village practices, beliefs, and attitudes is essential.

An inexperienced facilitator can use this discussion starter as it appears here. With experience, however, facilitators learn how to modify both materials and presentation, especially when they have been directly involved in the development of discussion starters. Posters can be used to represent village situations. Group members can rehearse and role play the dialogue, making any changes they see fit. If a cassette recorder is available, the discussion starter can be presented as a taped dialogue.

Come on, Dear!
Our children are so sickly!
Could it be that they get only cow's milk or formula everyday? Why do you refuse to breast-feed them?
They're your children, not some cow's!
Oh my lord! Just listen to me, will you? You just want to please yourself, going to those silly women's association meetings all the time...and ignoring your children!
You have some responsibilities, and to me the most important is feeding your children properly. Who says you'll get "saggy" from breast-feeding? I don't care about that anyway, so don't use me as your excuse!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Which person do you agree with, the husband or wife?
2. What are your reasons?
3. Do women in your village breast-feed, or do they use cow's milk and formula? What are their reasons?
4. What does the word "modern" mean in your community? How do "modern" people act? Is breast-feeding "modern"?
5. How would you solve this argument?

Ahhh! Listen to the man! He doesn't know what's happening. I'm busy with the women's association meetings. Besides, if I breast-feed and get all "saggy," you won't like it at all!
Humph! Now listen to him! You were the one who kept pushing me to join the association so that your wife would become "modern" and respected in the village. And now you change your tune since you've become an expert on child care and nutrition. What's really bothering you, anyway?

FACILITATOR INSTRUCTIONS:

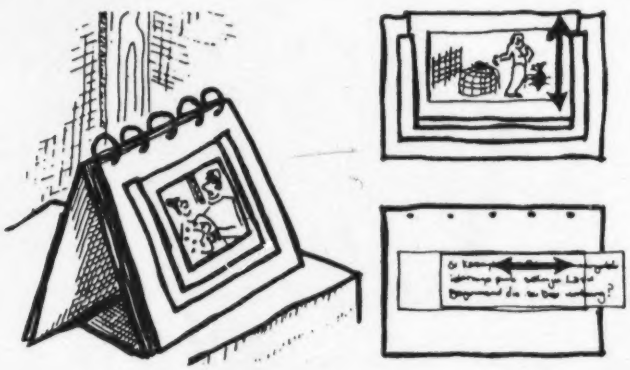
1. Divide the group into small groups (3-5 persons) for discussion (20 minutes).
2. Meet again in the large group to discuss the ideas and conclusions of each small group.
3. Make notes about the conclusions/decisions made during these discussions.
4. If they are still unclear about who they think is right, have them find out more about the subject by asking other people in the community, by identifying resource people or fieldworkers who might know more, or by looking for written information on the subject.
5. After discussion, ask, "Now what are you going to do? Why?" Have group make necessary plans to act on new understandings.

Example II: Culture-Based Discussion Starters

In many instances learning aids make little use of indigenous cultural material. When "cultural" material is used, it is often that of the classical culture, not the folk culture familiar to everyone everywhere. One variation of discussion starters made in Indonesia utilized the legendary tales of the West Javanese trickster, Si Kabayan.

Si Kabayan tales in themselves contain many of the features necessary for a discussion starter. They revolve around local attitudes, situations and conditions. They involve several perspectives (Is Si Kabayan clever, or dishonest?). They are also easily adaptable to a variety of media such as posters, flip charts, role plays, and cassettes. The discussion starter format uses Si Kabayan stories to generate discussion and involve learners in analysis of problems and attitudes. Since villagers are the best authorities on Si Kabayan stories and their meaning, they are easily involved in the materials development process.

The story presented in this example of discussion starters, "Si Kabayan Pays His Debt," was illustrated with posters held on a flip chart made from manila paper and scrap wire. Captions for the pictures were written on the back of each preceding poster so that someone could stand behind the flip chart and read the caption and at the same time show the relevant picture. Plastic pockets allowed for changing stories and graphics.



SI KABAYAN PAYS HIS DEBTS

Si Kabayan has gotten so in debt to the loan shark that it makes him dizzy to think about it. How can he possibly pay off his debts when he no longer possesses a single thing of value that might be sold to obtain the money? He broods and thinks and schemes for a whole day, straining his tired brain, until at last he hits upon a possibility.

"Finally I know what I must do," Kabayan tells his wife. Then he tells her of his plan. His wife agrees and enthusiastically prepares to help execute the scheme. First, they prepare a tub full of sticky palm juice, and Si Kabayan dunks himself in this. Then he covers his entire body with white chalk and feathers. After this he takes a large chicken basket and hides himself under it.

Shortly thereafter the loan shark, Ahmed, arrives at the house to claim his money.

"Oh, Si Kabayan isn't at home!" exclaims his wife.

"Then where has he gone, this Kabayan?" enjoins Ahmed.

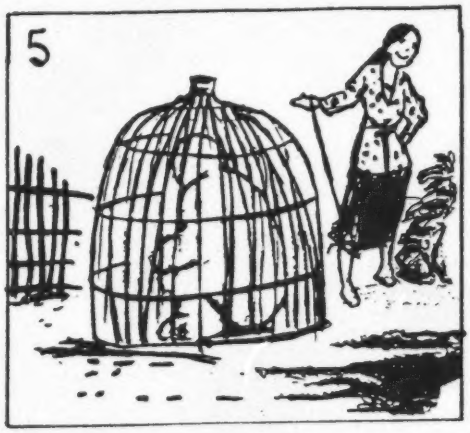
"He has gone to appear before the King," says Kabayan's wife.

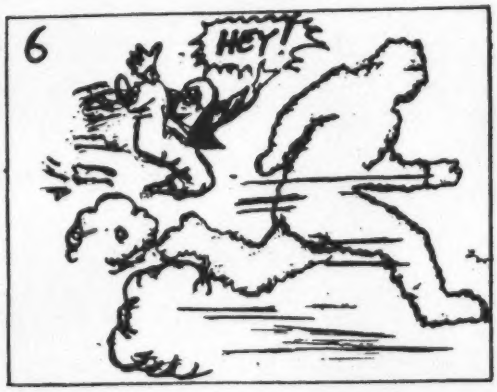
"The King? What has occurred that Si Kabayan must go before the King?"

"He wants to report to the King that he has captured a very rare mysterious bird..."

"A rare mysterious bird? What, pray tell, is this bird like? The moneylender is very excited and greatly desires to see the bird, but Kabayan's wife

*Reprinted from From the Field, New York: World Education, Inc., 1980.





rejects his requests. The bird is going to be presented to the King as a gift, and Kabayan has given strict orders that no one is to see the wonderful bird until the King has seen it himself with his own eyes. This makes Ahmed all the more eager to behold the bird, and he pleads with Kabayan's wife that he might be allowed just one peek at the mysterious and rare bird.

Kabayan's wife makes more false protestations, but finally leads the curious moneylender to the back of the house where he sees the large covered chicken basket. Burning with curiosity, he lifts the cover a few inches and then, not being able to see anything, he lifts the cover a little further...

Suddenly Kabayan leaps out of the basket and crows, "Ba-ra-tak-tak, ba-ra-tak-tak," and runs quickly away and out of sight. Kabayan's wife begins to cry and stare at the now empty basket.

"You!" she exclaims. "What am I to tell Kabayan now? And what will the King say? It's all your fault, and I must tell everything to my husband so that he can inform the King...hu-hu-hu...." And she begins to cry.

Ahmed is terrified. "Hey, please don't tell; don't tell!" he pleads. "Don't tell your husband. Don't let him tell the King!"

Finally Ahmed begs, "If you don't tell your husband that it was I who let the magic bird loose, and if he doesn't tell the King, then I free you from all your debts!"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Si Kabayan is in debt. How do you think he came to owe money?
2. Si Kabayan escaped his debt through a trick. By using such tricks, is Si Kabayan clever, or is he dishonest? Why?
3. Do people in your community get into debt? Why? To whom?
4. How can someone get out of debt? How can one avoid getting into debt in the first place?

FACILITATOR INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Divide the group into small groups for discussion of questions.
2. Have the groups meet together in the large group to discuss the ideas of the small groups. This discussion may have two parts: discussion of the Si Kabayan episode and discussion of community debt problems.
3. From the group results, make a list of reasons for debt in the community and mechanisms used to avoid debts.
4. Brainstorm with the group for possible ways to overcome their problems. Analyze constraints and resources affecting possible solutions.
5. Outline possible group activities which address their problems.

This discussion starter drew an unexpected amount of discussion and debate from a variety of audiences. Villagers were familiar with Si Kabayan and enjoyed discussing his exploits. They drew parallels to their own situations. Discussion of Si Kabayan stories always led to discussions of local norms and beliefs and exposed a variety of viewpoints within otherwise homogenous neighborhoods. Debates of this sort were often carried home with group participants. Using the materials also gave villagers a sense of power over the outside fieldworkers who had lost touch with village life. The villagers were Si Kabayan experts. Such stories also provided a means of discussing local practices in a non-threatening, non-judgmental way. Folk culture allows the trickster to deal directly with otherwise questionable and taboo subjects. At high-level training as well Si Kabayan proved useful, making the usual discussions more lively and less theoretical.

Example III: Discussion Starters for Training Fieldworkers

Discussion starters were originally designed for use with community groups. For income generating groups and cooperatives, they formed the principal method of analyzing attitudes, problems, and resources. From this, the group planned strategies for overcoming their problems.

Experience has shown, however, that discussion starters are also appropriate for training fieldworkers. Many training tools for these groups are often too complex and highly specific. They also stress definite answers to open-ended questions: "If you need capital, borrow from the credit union." Materials of this type are of little use to fieldworkers in their everyday work with village groups.

Discussion starters presenting problems in human terms have proved to be a valuable training tool. They are simple to produce, are easy to use, and bring to the surface a wide range of issues crucial to effective fieldwork. Discussion starters similar to the one presented here have also been created for management and leadership training. They resemble case studies and critical incidents, but the discussion starter format is easier to develop and produce, more interesting and involving to use, and appropriate for a wider range of audiences. The discussion starter can be used for national-level trainers as well as for village groups. The principles of dual perspective, problem analysis, utilization of group experience, and group dialogue/discussion remain the same. The following example was developed for recording on a cassette tape or for role playing.

WHAT IS ENTREPRENEURSHIP?

Rajina: I've hear it said that, "Where there's a way, there's a will." That's the way it is, isn't it, Wirana?

Wirana: No! That's not the way I heard it. It goes, "Where there's a will, there's a way."

Rajina: Ahh, I'm tired of hearing all that inspirational bull! I have the will and I've tried, but look at the result. Nothing!

Wirana: What efforts have you made that you speak of, Rajina?

Rajina: I tried to do handicrafts, for example, and the result, bankruptcy!

Wirana: Why?

Rajina: What do you think? Having the <u>will</u> was difficult when I had no capital, not enough tools, and trouble getting raw materials...yaa. I guess the <u>way</u> just wasn't open to me. And with no <u>way</u>, my <u>will</u> also faded.

Wirana: Yeah, maybe you're right. Without money we have trouble doing anything. But is it just money that decides the situation? Don't be discouraged!

Rajina: Come on. Don't lecture me; advice is cheap! Just look at us. What can we do without money? Just look at the facts.

Wirana: Hmmm, remember Mamat, the stingy one? He's one of the fortunate ones, the lucky ones. He has a business and lots of things.

Rajina: Yeah. He's one of the ones who succeeded. He must have had a <u>way</u> as well as the <u>will</u>. But I'm still surprised. How can someone like that succeed? He's nothing special. What's the secret?

Wirana: I just don't know. But the important thing is, what are <u>we</u> going to do?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Do we ourselves share problems similar to those of Rajina and Wirana?
2. What attitude do Rajina and Wirana have when it comes to entrepreneurship? How do they perceive themselves? Are their attitudes and perceptions similar to our own?
3. What problems do Wirana and Rajina face when it comes to entrepreneurship?
4. What resources are they utilizing? What resources might they utilize to solve their problems?
5. What determines success? From your own experience, what are the key elements of success?
6. What attitudes must we have and what steps must we take for successful attempts at entrepreneurship?

Comments About the Examples

As can be seen from the examples, discussion starters can take many forms and be adapted to various media. The example on "Mother's Milk" was designed to be read in small groups for discussion, although it has also been presented as a set of posters with dialogue that was role played. "Si Kabayan" uses a more complex medium and more graphics to tell a longer story. Due to its content, however, the response from village groups was so positive that Si Kabayan stories became a regular feature in the monthly village newspaper. These stories always generated fierce discussion on a wide range of topics. The third example features a long dialogue. It is best suited to a role play or recorded cassette format. This type of extended dialogue is often used for such topics as entrepreneurship, leadership, and other complex subjects. The dialogue is more guided and less open ended than those of the shorter discussion starters. For this reason it is better suited to training situations where basic objectives are set in advance, rather than to village situations where openness and relevance are essential.

Other Uses for Discussion Starters

Besides being used for training fieldworkers or for stimulating dialogue and discussion among villagers, discussion starters were also used for training students in community education. Topics included sanitation, youth unemployment, and nutrition. The students made posters, and dramatized discussion starters were recorded on cassettes. The tapes were played at sessions with community learning groups, and the students acted as facilitators of the discussion. Many of them were working with community groups for the first time. While learning groups responded well, they said that the problems they faced in their actual communities were different from the ones represented in the materials.

Subsequently, students worked with the learning groups to develop topics for discussion that were relevant to the community. In meetings with group members, problems were listed, prioritized, and analyzed. The group then developed scripts for their own discussion starters. These were role played by group members and recorded on cassettes. Some groups also developed posters, other visuals, and even short sociodramas for their discussion starters.

The process did not stop there. Discussion starters developed by one learning group were taken to different learning groups in other communities and presented. As in the original case, the learning groups responded well, but they also stated that the specific problems confronting their communities were different. They, too, developed their own discussion starters for use in their own communities and for presentation to groups in other areas. The benefits of the program were several:

- Students learned about the attitudes, perceptions, and problems of specific communities. Discussion starters were a tool that encouraged everyone's participation in assessing needs.
- Community members became materials developers. They learned new skills in problem analysis and were given a chance to facilitate other groups.
- Exchange of discussion starters among groups formed the basis for horizontal communication among communities.

The program made good use of community resources, knowledge, and experience. Learning group members were no longer passive recipients but were given the tools to become development workers themselves. Once the program was initiated, dependence on outside facilitation and materials was minimal. Villagers in learning groups took control over their own curriculum, materials, and educational process.

Do's and Don't's

From the authors' experience with discussion starters, guidelines for developing and using them can be defined:

- DO talk with the audience before developing a discussion starter. Understanding their experience and perspective is crucial.
- DO use simple and colloquial language. Have someone from the audience at least read the dialogue before it is used.
- DO make notes of the discussion. Information learned can lead to further sessions and to discussion of more relevant topics.
- DO vary the media of presentation. Record some dialogues and role play others. Use posters and graphics where possible.

- DO follow up on the outcome of discussion sessions. Assist with information and resource needs. Conduct further sessions on the same topic if there is interest. Discussion starters are only meant to initiate the learning process.
- DO make materials that learners can take home with them.

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- DON'T hide "correct" messages in discussion starters. They are not meant to be persuasion tools.
- DON'T talk too much during the group discussion. The facilitator's job is to listen and to let the learners talk.
- DON'T be inflexible. If the group does not find the topic interesting, don't force it. Ask for suggestions. Have the group define more relevant topics.
- DON'T attempt too much at one session. Plan and conduct follow-up sessions.

Conclusion

The best test for any nonformal education technique or material is its utility in the field. Discussion starters have proved effective within village communities throughout Indonesia.

Good materials will evolve and develop with use. Discussion starters were originally developed for village groups involved in functional literacy programs; they are now used by a variety of agencies for purposes which include needs assessment, training, and evaluation. Content areas for discussion starters have encompassed such fields as health, nutrition, unemployment, cooperatives, agriculture, family planning, and social welfare.

Finally, with discussion starters participation becomes practical. Everyone, from planners to community members, can be involved not only in the use of discussion starters, but in their development and improvement.

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